Religion in European History

Religious Changes Sweep Across Europe During the 16th Century

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Martin Luther in 1522, Kunstsammlungen gemalt in Wittenberg

The Protestant Reformation was established in Europe by Martin Luther. The Counter Reformation followed by Wars of Religion in France.

Following the Fall of Rome in 487 AD, the glue that held Europe together was Christianity. Technology, learning and social progress all but disappeared as Europe sank into what would be known as the Dark Ages. For 500 years people lived in isolated villages, in miserable conditions, with only the hope of eternal salvation to make life worth enduring. Slowly trade, learning and general progress began during the High Middle Ages. By the late 1300s and early 1400s the teachings of Ancient Greece and Rome had resurfaced in Europe and were once more influencing scholars and philosophers in what would be known as The Renaissance. All of these new ideas in learning, coupled with the devastating effects of the bubonic plague on Europe left people less that happy with the Christian Church, which some viewed as corrupt and in need of reform.

Religious Change In Europe: Martin Luther Starts a Reformation

Early religious reformers in Europe, including Jan Hus (1372-1415) a Bohemian scholar and John Wycliffe (1328-1384), a professor at Oxford were unceremoniously burned at the stake for heresy. This more or less put a holt to any large scale church reform. That all changed in 1517, when Martin Luther, a German monk, expressed his growing concern of church corruption in a 95 Theses, which called for a full reform of the Christian Church. In it, he stressed that people could only win salvation by faith in God's forgiveness, the bible was the one true authority and the Pope wasn’t really all that important. Luther’s beliefs spread quickly across Europe, in part because of the printing press, which made printing pamphlets easy and cheap. Among Luther’s most fervent supporters were several protesting German princes who would turn religion in Europe on its ear.

Religious Change in Europe: John Calvin and John Knox

John Calvin and John Knox were leading figures in the Protestant Reformation. They helped spread Protestantism throughout Western Europe. John (Jean) Calvin (1509-1564) brought Protestantism to Switzerland. In 1536, Calvin published the Institute of the Christian Religion, in whichhe outlined his ideas about God, salvation and human nature. John Knox (1514-1572) was a Scottish theologian who fled England where he had been living, after Mary Tudor (Mary I/Bloody Mary) ascended the English throne in 1533. He traveled to Geneva, where he met Calvin and became one of his most devout followers. In 1560, Knox and his followers established Presbyterianism, a version of Calvinism, as the official religion of Scotland.

Religious Change in Europe: The Catholic Church Fights Back

In an effort to stop the spread of Protestantism, the Catholic Church introduced sweeping reforms to its internal order, a period of time known as the Counter Reformation. The church established the Jesuit order, to stop the spread of Protestantism and made sweeping reforms within itself, which were outlined at the Council of Trent.

Religious Change in Europe: France Goes To War With Itself

In France the Protestant Reformation brought turmoil and bloodshed. Known as the Wars of Religion in France, fighting between French Catholics and Protestants lasted thirty years, from 1559 until 1589. Catholics, led by the Duke of Guise, waged violent wars against French Protestants, who were called Huguenots. The matter of religion was finally settled when Henri of Navarre converted to Catholicism, remarking, “Paris is well worth a Mass.” In 1598, Henri passed the Edict of Nantes, which granted Huguenots the right to public worship in over two hundred towns. Henri’s willingness to sacrifice his religious principles to political necessity, helped save the French monarchy, and paved the way for Absolutism in the 1600s.